

Slouching Toward Johannesburg: U.S. is a Long Way from Sustainability

By John C. Dernbach

It has now been ten years since the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, or Earth Summit, in Rio de Janeiro. At that conference, the United States and other countries agreed to implement an ambitious plan for sustainable development—both at home and internationally. The World Summit on Sustainable Development (Aug. 26-Sept. 4, 2002) in Johannesburg will provide an international assessment of what has happened over the past ten years, and lead to decisions about where to go next.

The U.S. has unquestionably begun to take some steps toward sustainable development, largely because of our environmental and conservation laws. Yet, on balance, the United States is now far from being a sustainable society, and in many respects is further away than it was at the time of the Earth Summit in 1992. Unlike many other developed countries, the United States has not used a strategic process to move the country toward a sustainable future and has not educated the American people about the opportunities and challenges of sustainable development.

With 5% of the world's population, the United States was at the time of the Earth Summit responsible for about 24% of the world's energy consumption and almost 30% of the world's raw materials consumption. Since the Earth Summit, materials use has increased 10%, primary energy consumption has increased 21%, and energy-related carbon dioxide emissions have increased by 13%. Over and over, increases in materials and energy efficiency, and in the effectiveness of pollution controls for individual sources, were outweighed by increases in consumption. Despite a significant increase in municipal waste recycling in the past decade, for example, American generation and disposal

of municipal solid waste per capita have been growing since 1996. According to Harvard biologist Edward O. Wilson, "four more planet Earths" would be needed for "every person in the world to reach present U.S. levels of consumption with existing technology." Yet the U.S. standard of living—equated with high levels of consumption and "the good life"—is widely envied and emulated throughout the world.

National Sustainable

Development Strategy is Needed

The federal government should adopt and implement a national strategy for sustainable development, with specified goals and priorities, to harness all sectors of society to achieve our economic, social, environmental, and security goals. The strategy would lead to a stronger, more prosperous America with a higher quality of life because we would be pursuing these goals in ways that support each other in greater and greater degrees over time, rather than undermining each other. The strategy could be modeled on that of the European Union or states such as Oregon and New Jersey, and specifically address climate change, biodiversity, international trade, and other major issues. A set of indicators to measure progress in achieving goals would make the strategy more effective and meaningful.

In addition, the U.S. needs to recognize that its substantial consumption levels, coupled with domestic population growth, have serious environmental, social, and economic impacts. Americans also need to understand that human well-being can be maintained and enhanced by more efficient and effective use of materials and energy. A shift in taxes from labor and income,

on one hand, to materials and energy consumption, on the other, would encourage both greater efficiency and reduced negative environmental impacts. The challenge for the United States is to be an attractive example of what sustainable development can mean. In this respect, international leadership begins at home.

The U.S. needs to take a stronger and more constructive leadership role internationally, not only on terrorism but also on the broad range of issues related to sustainable development. Congress should repeal or modify laws, policies, and subsidies that encourage unsustainable development. Protection of natural resources and the environment must focus more holistically on the resources to be protected, and on understanding those resources. Transportation, public health, and other social infrastructure and institutions should be designed and operated to promote economic, environmental, and social goals at the same time.

In virtually every area of American life, a few people and organizations are exercising leadership for sustain-

ability. The United States would take a large and decisive step toward sustainability if individuals, businesses, educational institutions, local and state governments, federal agencies, and others would simply adopt and build on the leading sustainability practices of their counterparts. A properly conceived and implemented strategy would lead to that result.

Toward a Brighter Future for Our Children and Grandchildren

We now face growing environmental degradation around the world and an increasing gap between rich and poor. These are related problems, and they hinder or undermine everything else we care about—security, economic development, social well-being, and even effective governance. Put differently, poverty and environmental degradation are deeply destabilizing because they stifle or reduce opportunities and quality of life for many, many people.

In the next 50 years, global population is projected to increase by three

billion people, and the global economy is likely to grow by four or five times. As difficult as things now are, environmental degradation and the gap between rich and poor are likely to get much worse if we continue with business as usual. Should that be our legacy for our children and grandchildren?

We know what we need to do to move toward sustainability, and we also know why. As Americans, we are called to face these challenges, and to seize this opportunity.

(John Dernbach, law professor at Widener University, is the editor of Stumbling Toward Sustainability, a new book published the Environmental Law Institute (www.eli.org). This commentary for Foreign Policy in Focus (www.fpiif.org) was adapted from testimony he delivered to a joint hearing of the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee and Senate Foreign Relations Committee on July 24, 2002. He can be reached at: <John.C.Dernbach@law.widener.edu>.)